



A great nation is characterized by how well we live together



John F. Gilligan

We were not born a nation on July 4, 1776. Nor were we made free from British rule. The Fourth of July marked the formal declaration of war against the British Empire. It was an eight-year battle as well as a vicious civil war between Americans seeking independence and those loyal to the king.

Lost to memory in the mists of time are the horrors of the Revolutionary War: a poorly equipped Continental Army, often without shoes, ridden with deadly smallpox and men rotting to death as prisoners in the bowels of British ships.

Americans were also terrorizing fellow Americans with tar and feathering, arson, beatings and murder. A cycle of retaliations with increasing brutality plagued the war in the South to its bitter end at Charleston, S.C., on Dec. 14, 1782.

And then there were the stark cultural differences that existed among the colonies that inhibited cooperation. The Continental Army under Gen. George Washington depended on state and local militias over which he had no control. Yet militias often saw their own county or colony as their only priority. Collaboration was hardly a hallmark among the newly declared "Free and Independent States." Nor would it be in the decades that followed.

Each independent state governed itself much as it did before the war. Colonial self-government was initiated when settlers first

set foot on American soil. So when Britain intruded upon the governing of their internal affairs, it had a tiger by the tail.

The last thing the freed states wanted was another government over them. This raises the question: What is it that we actually celebrate on the Fourth if it isn't the birth of our nation?

The Treaty of Paris on Sept. 3, 1783, sealed America's independence. But within a few years these independent states were gridlocked and overwhelmed with international debt. A better union among them was needed to secure their freedoms and generate prosperity.

The U.S. Constitution of 1787 was proposed. Yet it was barely approved and on condition of Ten Amendments. But would this new Federal government

even work? America is the longest living democracy in the world. It lives because it stands for something greater than itself. It has a vision, which would become the nation's polestar. That's what all the Colonies agreed upon on July 4, 1776. No one knew then or thought much about what form it would take. First, the war had to be won.

Thomas Paine set the stage in January 1776. "The birthday of a new world is at hand," he wrote, "and we have it in our power to make it anew." Paine's book, "Common Sense," was second only to the Bible in popularity, and would become America's first bestseller.

Six months later, Thomas Jefferson drew the blueprint. Monarchy would be replaced by a republic. People would no longer be subjects of a king but citizens equal to one another. And government would

be by the consent of the people. The idea was laughable in London but electrifying in America.

The Declaration of Independence boldly stated that the Colonies were "Free and Independent States ... absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown." It also provided a moral and political philosophy that would undergird a new nation in which "all men were created equal."

Years later, Abraham Lincoln praised Jefferson for his ability "to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times." This "abstract truth," said Lincoln, was not fully functional at the Founding. But he noted it would be "a rebuke and a stumbling-block" in the days to come to all those who oppress others.

America was never a ready-made nation. It's been a people's perilous enterprise. Yet, we have come a long way for the better from 1776. Each decade, if not year, has unique challenges with its failures and successes. For human nature has both noble and ignoble proclivities.

A great nation is characterized by how well we live together. Will we be guided by the "higher angels of our nature" — the vision of 1776?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Or will the lesser angels of oppression prevail?

The character of a nation reflects its people. And making America great is not only the task at hand but ultimately in our hands.

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